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The *blik* of an I: On the Possibility of Solipsistic Discourse

Jeremy J. Karpen

For years I have read with fervent reverence and excitement the philosophical struggle against solipsism as it has played out in the writings of Descartes, Berkeley, Wittgenstein, and numerous other influential philosophical minds. My excitement, however, was not derived from a desire to witness the defeat of this skeptical goliath. Rather, I hoped that the power of solipsism would overcome any quest for certainty and be embraced as a valuable interpretation of existence. This would not be the case, however, as we have still yet to find a philosopher willing to identify as a solipsist and champion its cause. There still exists no philosopher who is willing to contest the varying manifestations of solipsism that are defeated by critics on the basis of technical fallacies in service of existential certainty. It is clearly problematic to have a philosophy, which has played such an important role in the history of epistemological and ontological philosophy, have no advocate and therefore necessarily be constructed by its opponents. The question arises, however, as to what it would mean to be a solipsist. What would adherence to such a lonely doctrine mean within the confines of daily life? Would a solipsist see value in engaging in philosophical debate? If indeed the solipsist would see no value in debate, as I am inclined to argue, this position has important consequences for a philosophical canon that obsesses with dragging the solipsist into arguments with a seemingly mad desire to be victorious.

In order to contextualize and perhaps validate the discussion that follows, I feel it important to note that I have indeed embraced solipsism as reality, and in so doing regard it as valid and infallible. As such, the reader will please excuse the use of the pronoun 'he' in reference to the solipsist as it is in accordance with the author's sex. The purpose of this discussion is neither to instigate a resurgence of discourse concerning the

validity of solipsism nor to argue for or against various truths about existence. This discussion, rather, should be regarded as a plea to cease discourse on solipsism altogether. While acceptance or denial of the relative truth of the doctrine may maintain personal meaning, its discussion is ultimately vacuous.

What is Solipsism?

The most complete articulation of solipsism, which I will attempt to advance herein, I call *pure solipsism*. At the outset, I will acknowledge the language barrier, which will surely confound and confuse certain sections of the argument for the reader. It is difficult to locate words in language that are capable of capturing a meaning, which transcends this world. A Wittgensteinian critic might argue that solipsism itself is a result of a misuse of an inherently public language. This critique, while sound in terms of a public discourse, is ignorant of the logical appeal of solipsism that is gained through the thought exercises, which serve to deliver one into it. Once one has arrived at a solipsistic understanding of existence, irrespective of relative acceptance, a type of meaning that is separate from language is intuitively understood as well. It is not so simple to forget the intuitively logical meaning of solipsism upon confrontation with problematic syntax and grammar. Instead, it makes more sense to deny the public-private distinction altogether for language and instead recognize that a language which is spoken by the inhabitants of one's mind must a priori be private. This distinction will be spelled out further in the discussion of pure solipsism, which follows. The point is to recognize that a solipsistic discussion supposes that public discourse takes place within a necessarily private sphere.

As he manages a rather complete summary of the various philosophical writings that have combined to form the popular conception of solipsism, I will use Johnstone's¹ terms to discuss some tenets of pure solipsism.

¹ Johnstone, A. A. Rationalized Epistemology: Taking Solipsism Seriously. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Johnstone considers three different categories of solipsists in his critique: *internal world solipsists*, *observed world solipsists*, and *unreal world solipsists*.² Internal world solipsism states, "the world of one's own representations is all that exists." Observed world solipsism states "the world exists only in as much as it is perceived by oneself." Unreal world solipsism states "the world is unreal in that it is one's personal illusion or dream, or demon-conjuration." Johnstone uses subdivisions of these categories as the targets for his arguments against solipsism, with the idea that a defeat of each individual subcategory will ultimately constitute a defeat of solipsism as a whole. Without discussing the merits of his approach or actual argument, I will instead focus on how these categories relate to pure solipsism.

For the internal world solipsist the realm of existence is equated with personal sensations and representations whence constructed, all ultimately arising from personal perception. The position can be best described as the equation of existence and perception (existence=perception) where perception is understood to be a process known only to be possessed by the solipsist. While Johnstone would maintain that this position is different from observed world solipsism, it is clear that only a slight logical maneuver is necessary to show that the two are equivalent. If existence=perception is simply reversed by the rules of equivalence and then negated the result is \sim perception= \sim existence. This reformulation of internal world solipsism is the same as observed world solipsism, which holds that objects exist only insofar as they are perceived. The two, taken together constitute a sort of Berkeleyian *esse est percipi* position whereby that which exists is that which has been perceived and nothing else.

Johnstone's third category, unreal world solipsism, is in fact a category of thought exercises that might lead one to start doubting with the ultimate aim being confrontation of the problem of solipsism. This category contains the subdivisions of *demoniac*, *phantasmata*, and *oneirata solipsism*. Demoniac

² Ibid, p. 15.

solipsism refers to the question of whether the world is simply a personal hoax conjured up by a demon, phantasmata solipsism refers to the world as a personal illusion, and oneirata solipsism addresses the distinction between dreams and reality. None of these three types of solipsism can be maintained once one has realized that while the demon, illusion, or dream may allow doubt concerning the existence of the world, they too cannot be verified. These solipsisms merely lead to the process of doubting which ultimately removes its own catalyst leaving only the metaphysical quandary.

What is important in discussing the definitions that Johnstone imposes upon solipsism is that they are essentially stages in an incomplete skeptical process. If one were to start contemplating an unreal world solipsism, it would ultimately lead to a sort of hybrid of the internal and observed world solipsisms, which I call pure solipsism.

Pure solipsism results from a verification process that creates doubt concerning the existence of everything—short of one's own mind or thought process. This process assumes an acceptance of a verificationist theory of meaning, such as that articulated by A.J. Ayer in his early work.³ This theory of meaning holds a proposition can attain factual significance if and only if one can know what observations are sufficient for its acceptance or rejection. Ayer argues that if an assumption of validity for a given proposition is consistent with all possible future experience then it is either tautological or a pseudo-proposition. According to this theory, solipsism would be reduced to the level of a pseudo-proposition in that no possible future experience within the worldgame could be considered inconsistent. It is important here to note that solipsism is only considered a pseudo-proposition within the worldgame. While no experiences within the game can count for or against solipsism, it is plausible that experiences following the end of the game will allow a validity judgment. Solipsism requires a broader definition

³ Ayer, A. J. Language, Truth and Logic. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952.

of 'observation' in that it must take account of possible experiences of the mind that transcend the current thought game.

This theory allows the doubt necessary to establish solipsism in that it recognizes the inability of observation to establish the relative validity of certain propositions. Just as Ayer was unable to verify the existence of mountains on the far side of the moon, there is a similar unverifiability for all propositions that assert the existence of things outside the realm of observation. This example highlights the idea that, although our current language and science do not possess the vocabulary or the tools to verify a proposition, which asserts the existence of the mind, it is conceivable that such developments may take place at some future point. One might recall that science once considered the basic components of existence air, earth, fire, and water and the eventual discovery of the complex structures, which actually constitute even those simple essences. This type of reference allows the possibility that certain propositions may currently be valid and true but not be conceivably verifiable.

Although Ayer would not intend this result, the theory can also be used to argue that only that which is in immediate perception can be verified. In this discussion, I talk about verification of objects, although my reader should understand that the verification process actually addresses propositions, which would assert the existence of said objects. Herein, I discuss objects and hope that the accompanying existence assertions are understood. While I can currently verify the existence of my computer and this afternoon will likely verify the existence of my car, it is my lack of ability to verify my computer and my car concurrently that ultimately raises doubt concerning the existence of either object. It is impossible to verify both France and Germany at the same time and thus it will always be possible to doubt one or the other at any given moment. Some would most likely argue that there is no reason to doubt the continued existence of objects once they have been initially established through verification. While this is clearly a more appealing and less exhausting way to view the world (although it is arguably

equally less taxing to accept the nonexistence of everything), it results from a higher order process of inference that is not inherent—humans lack a conception of ‘object permanence’ in infancy and learn to infer the continued existence of objects.

The only concurrent verification that can take place is one of ‘I & France.’ The ‘I’ in this conjunction is not the physical ‘I’, in the sense of a body or social identity, rather this ‘I’ is something wholly removed from the worldgame that cannot be subjected to verification nor can it be denied however. While there are clearly moments when one is unable to verify the existence of one’s own body, there are never moments when consciousness cannot verify itself. The problem with this type of verification is that it is not derived from the senses. In fact, awareness of this other ‘I’ cannot conceivably come from the senses, as it is the master thereof. This type of awareness is not well represented in the language of this worldgame and is oft referred to as a sort of intuition for a lack of a better word. A proposition that purports the existence of this ‘I’ will lack verifiability and validity in language and therefore in the whole of the game.

This process results in the intuitive conclusion that if anything can be said to exist, surely it is this that is thinking (similar to *cogito ergo sum* but perhaps the substitution of *esse* for *sum* would be more appropriate). There is no reason to suppose that there exists anything beyond this thought process. A pure solipsist could take many views of what the nature of the world is therefore, but perhaps the most logical is that it is simply a part of a thought process or mind game, referred to herein as ‘worldgame.’ Whether this worldgame is a result of some demoniac intervention, a dream, or some other form of illusion is immaterial. It is clear, however, that this game is played out both consciously and subconsciously, as the solipsist cannot control every aspect of existence. It is meaningless to talk about how long the game is played or what occurs at its beginning or end because time can only certainly be understood as a rule of this particular game. This is the genius of pure solipsism and ultimately why a discourse concerning it is ridiculous—it does not make any

statement about things within the world but rather recharacterizes it in its entirety as a thought process of one particular being. Objects, actions, and people become sensation bundles. The mind organizes pieces of the world in co-occurring or logically related bundles and schemas—thinking of this type of organization makes it easier to conceive of the lack of actual objects or people.

It is worth mention here that for the pure solipsist, who embraces an absolute equation of perception and existence, there seems to follow a conclusion of existential permanence. If indeed the existence of anything requires that it first be perceived, then the end of existence would also need to be perceived. For an end is in essence a change from perceiving something to perceiving something new—in this case nothing. Insofar as it would be impossible to perceive this change, it cannot occur. This allows the solipsist a logical assurance that existence will not cease when this game terminates. While there may initially appear to be a certain appeal to the notion of a sort of guaranteed immortality, deeper reflection reveals a more lonely and frustrating interpretation. There is a certain satisfaction that can be derived from an endpoint or a clear destination, which is denied the solipsist.

The main idea to derive from this discussion is that pure solipsism does not actually make any claims that alter the world. The world remains as it is—it has either always existed within the mind of the solipsist or it has not—the question is unanswerable and pointless.

Why then, one might ask of a solipsist, is this doctrine of any value—why would a solipsist admit the vacuousness of his own doctrine? This admission is important because it serves, hopefully, to bring an end to discourse concerning the importance of solipsism, or rather its defeat, to certainty within the meaning structure of this world. It can still be valuable to discuss solipsism and what it might mean to the individual, who embraces it, but it is no longer valuable to pit some construction of it against a pragmatic, existential, or other seemingly opposed philosophical claim. What possible meaning, however, could solipsism have for

the solipsist? Insofar as the solipsist is unable to understand any realm beyond the current worldgame, any thoughts concerning the nature of existence must be articulated in the language of this game and so too therefore must meaning be expressed. Meaning for this worldgame, however, is generally thought of as public thus making an inarticulable doctrine meaningless. There exists no reasonable means for integrating the concept of a sole mind as the location of the world, into discourse. A conception of public language raises Wittgensteinian concerns regarding the possibility of a private language for the solipsist as the existence thereof would appear necessary. This problem is immaterial as all language is actually private and the public/private distinction that Wittgenstein assumes is reduced to a communication difficulty between two distinct areas of the solipsist's mind. There is a language which obeys the rules of the worldgame, which is not necessarily the primary language of the mind in which it is played. The problem for the solipsist is to determine what role this knowledge concerning existence should play while in this worldgame and how precisely to articulate it to oneself. It would seem that the only purpose for a more public articulation would be similar to the purpose at hand and it would be beneficial to adopt vocabulary that does not, in itself, confound the position.

For the solipsist, solipsism seems to occupy a position that has less application than a worldview and yet more logical validity than a religious doctrine. A worldview it seems would lead to specific actions on issues of social importance, while solipsism might only lead to different thoughts about the meaning of life and death and perhaps a larger indifference on issues of self-preservation or betterment. The doctrine might encourage the solipsist to play the game for as long as possible but ultimately allows a lack of accountability concerning the totality of how life is lived. Solipsism seems to be the result of logically sound arguments that do not effectively pose any challenges to dominant scientific thought and as such seems wholly different from a religious doctrine. However, if it is not a worldview and not a

religious doctrine then what role does it play in the life of the solipsist and what might he call it? Perhaps, he might call it a *blik*.

Solipsism as a blik

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees, 'There is no gardener.' So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds...But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movement of the wire ever betrays an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the Sceptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'⁴

Antony Flew relates this parable to illustrate the difference between an assertion and a sort of vacuous claim—for his purposes theological claims. In the parable, the Believer's assertion that there is a gardener is continually qualified, as experience demonstrates a lack of gardener based on evidentiary claims. The final line demonstrates that the gardener has ultimately been qualified to the point of existing despite any possibility of the demonstration or denial thereof. The point here is that a valid assertion requires a conception of the negation of what one asserts. This conception is altogether absent for the

⁴ Wisdom, J. *Gods*. Reprinted in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Flew, A. & MacIntyre, A. (Eds.) New York: MacMillan Company, 1955, p. 96.

Believer in the story and is similarly absent for theological claims. Flew indicates that that “to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion.”⁵

The relation of this problem to pure solipsism comes in consideration of what the solipsist means when he claims to have knowledge of the existence of his mind. The reduction of existence that formulates pure solipsism must end when it reaches a concept of one’s own mind or thought process. One can assert or deny the existence of objects and bodies and other physical entities but the very essence of solipsism is that one cannot deny the existence of mind. What does it mean therefore, to deny the existence of everything, but upon finding it impossible to deny your own mind, attempt to assert with confidence the necessity of its existence, and then be confronted with the lack of validity of that assertion? As noted earlier, pure solipsism entails not only the existential necessity of one’s own mind but also that this existence is permanent. The reason for claiming that one can be certain of the existence of mind is the same reason for denying the validity of the same assertion—it is not possible to conceive of its negation. Any claim which purports a possible conception of the nonexistence of one’s own mind would ultimately rely on a perceptual experience or nonexperience that requires the existence of the mind. If a necessary condition of existence is being part of the mind then it is logically impossible for that mind to not exist—that is, unless the word ‘exist’ is limited by the worldgame that generated it. If this is indeed the case, then the solipsist cannot claim logical validity within this game. Instead, the basis for solipsism, the mind on which existence is dependent must be considered something else—a *blik*.

In response to Flew’s discussion of the validity of theological claims, R.M. Hare advanced a position that allows for a plurality of experience that does not maintain scientific validity.⁶

⁵ Flew, A. & MacIntyre, A. (Eds.) New Essays in Philosophical Theology. New York: MacMillan Company, 1955, p. 98.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 99-103.

He relates the story of a student who would seem to be suffering from paranoid delusions. The student is convinced that all dons want to murder him despite all attempts to demonstrate otherwise and in fact in complete absence of any supporting evidence. Hare points out that, although no experiential evidence will count against the student's theory and that, according to Flew, he asserts nothing about dons; the student still thinks something different from what others think. This difference, Hare calls a *blik*. He claims that everyone has a respective *blik* and that although no one can force someone to adopt a particular *blik* over another, there are clearly more socially acceptable ones to have. Hare cites Hume's experiment of "doubting the ordinary man's *blik* about the world, and showing that no proof could be given to make us adopt one *blik* rather than another," noting that he then turned to backgammon to relieve his mind.

The best articulation of the *blik* as it relates to solipsism comes, however, in Basil Mitchell's response.⁷ Mitchell presents a different parable, which is unnecessary to retell here, that leads him to conclude that one can actually demonstrate reasons for holding a particular *blik* and also be aware of reasons to the contrary despite an inability or lack of desire to relinquish the *blik*. Mitchell claims that it is possible to have an assertion that is not conclusively falsifiable but that need not be considered vacuous. These types of assertions, he claims, can be categorized in one of three ways: as "provisional hypotheses to be discarded if experience tells against them," as "significant articles of faith," or as "vacuous formulae to which experience makes no difference and which make no difference to life."⁸

For the solipsist, an assertion of the sole existence of the mind can operate as a sort of provisional hypothesis. This hypothesis, however, operates only on a personal level that is best not brought into worldgame discourse and that is maintained in a sort of smug fashion until something following the end of this worldgame might force a reformulation. In terms of public

⁷ Ibid. pp. 103-105.

⁸ Ibid. p. 105.

discourse, solipsism does indeed operate as a sort of insanity. Solipsism is a vacuous formulation of existence to which worldly experience makes no difference and which makes little to no difference to life.

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Insofar as solipsism denies everything, including the physical body of the solipsist thus reducing everything to properties of something beyond physical existence, it in effect denies nothing. Solipsism merely recharacterizes the nature of existence and places it in a realm for which a public discourse has no vocabulary or knowledge. Solipsism leaves the world and all its properties and relations intact but places it within the intangible mind of the solipsist. As the solipsist cannot convince anyone that this is indeed the case, nor would he/she have any interest in doing so, solipsism can only be thought of as a sort of *blik*. The *blik* of solipsism can affect the way that a solipsist lives a life but the relative nature of its truth cannot be meaningfully questioned publicly.

If philosophers were to continually construct a challenge to certainty as if it were the doctrine of a particular nonexistent group of insane persons and regard it as the most damaging challenge possible because of its logical infallibility, while noting its practical absurdity, they might approximate the reputation that solipsism has endured for so many years. In writing this paper, I have in effect demonstrated my own insanity. I am, however, willing to admit that in terms of this world, I am insane. This paper serves the therapeutic purpose of allowing the personal realization that solipsism has no actual value in discourse and that the struggle to articulate its tenets and ramifications to the world is not due to some personal deficit. To continue to argue for or against a doctrine that is vacuous in its best formulation despite the apparent inclination toward, and fear of, holding it, is most certainly folly. It is neither due to fear nor coincidence that solipsism has no advocate in the canon of philosophical discourse. Solipsism has nothing to add to this discourse nor does it possess

the otherworldly vocabulary necessary to empower a philosopher with its voice.